Deepening Civic Engagement: The Future of Civic Participation through Public Libraries

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Abstract

Civic participation falls under the umbrella of civic engagement and refers to the action or activity that takes place with regard to the public sphere. This paper will demonstrate the importance of civic participation and why public libraries must create programming that spurs members of the community to engage civically. It will also analyze various research from Putnam, Kranich, Cohen, Lankes, Palfrey, Schull, and Wiegand. It will examine arguments in favor of expanding the library's role in civic engagement by moving towards actionable approaches and will question the library's role as the cornerstone of democracy. This paper will also discuss the challenges and opportunities for libraries to expand their sphere of influence on civic participation. This paper recognizes that encouraging civic participation is a critical aspect of our role as librarians which further creates an engaged and empowered citizenry that can potentially have a global impact on societies.

Keywords: civic participation, democracy in libraries, civic engagement, civic disengagement, social capital

Background

We had our biggest civics lesson in 2020, as we learned the extent of the executive branch's powers and the result when the checks to the balances do not always pan out. Unless someone is well versed in major political events in history, most people my age were not alive to experience the impeachment process against Richard Nixon, but we received a civics lesson on that as well earlier this year. The fact is that our political processes are complicated, and we should not have to wait until we are bordering on a constitutional crisis to know what is at stake. For this reason, civic engagement is a library trend that needs to be emphasized. The core values of librarianship include the value of democracy, education and lifelong learning, as well as social responsibility which all lead to the need for more civic engagement. Bridging elements from the library's core values with existing tools such as access to information and public trust, contributes to the development of new models.

The goal is to move beyond providing access to information and instead, facilitate impartial conversations about politics which will then increase civic knowledge, voter registration, and civic participation. "For, it is in the public realm where common political understandings emerge, where political will arises, and where public trust is built" (Kranich, 2005). This paper will demonstrate the importance of civic engagement in terms of civic participation and how public libraries must create programming that spurs members of the community to engage civically. It will examine arguments in favor of expanding the library's role in civic engagement by moving towards actionable approaches. It will also discuss the challenges and opportunities for libraries to expand their sphere of influence on civic participation. This paper recognizes that encouraging civic participation is a critical aspect of our

role as librarians which further creates an engaged and empowered citizenry that can potentially have a global impact on societies.

The importance of civic participation in librarianship

Civic participation is important to librarianship because libraries have a fundamental responsibility to their communities in ensuring that people are fully equipped with the tools they need to make informed decisions that impact their lives. This falls in line with libraries' core values of social responsibility and democracy. "If libraries are to fulfill their civic mission in the information age, they must find ways to engage citizens in order to encourage their involvement in democratic discourse and community renewal" (Kranich, 2005). Libraries have a history of civic engagement and in providing programs and services that support it for decades, so this is not a new concept, however, these programs need to evolve so they can transition from a "thin democracy" to a "strong democracy." Kranich explains that *thin democracy* involves "the traditional process that provides access to information" while *strong democracy* involves "spaces for citizens to engage in the civic life of their communities" (Kranich, 2017). This suggests that it is necessary for libraries to reclaim their roles as educators and increase their commitment with more actionable approaches to civic engagement. It is imperative for libraries to continue to be that beacon of information all while educating and engaging the public. "It is not too much of a stretch to say that the fate of well informed, open, free republics could hinge on the future of libraries" (Palfrey, 2015). As we move into an information-based society, this is where it is going to matter most. How we choose to move forward in our plight to uphold democracy will determine whether we have succeeded in creating a thriving, well-informed citizenry.

The effects on librarianship now and in the future

This trend will have positive effects on librarianship and library organizations in the future. Civic engagement is an instrument that has been underutilized by libraries and has been viewed as a knowledge and information issue. Alternatively, libraries need to broaden their scope to an actionable approach and concentrate on civic participation. They have been thinking small, only occupied with the literacy aspect of it rather than centering on the most important characteristic which is civic participation. Kranich explains that "much evidence indicates that librarians are eager to assume a role in developing the civic capacity of citizens so they can revitalize communities and strengthen democracy" (Kranich, 2013). What is the use of having all this information available if there is going to be no action that follows? Knowledge alone will not make an impact.

LIS Scholars have concluded that it is time that libraries make upgrades to the way they conduct outreach in communities while others argue that there needs to be a complete restructuring of the way that civics is built-in to the library. They also propose changing their current practices of civic engagement, increasing social capital, and applying community values in order to have a greater influence on communities. Libraries are not known to remain stagnant as technological advances have forced libraries to compete with the internet and become more innovative. This is inevitable in library and information as it is constantly rethinking its role and always manages to adapt to new trends. An area that is currently in need of improvement is civic participation. While civic literacy is a good starting point, we have to move beyond arming our citizens with knowledge. Libraries need to reevaluate the way that they view civic engagement and how their roles impact democracy. "The most promising development in the world of libraries is the growth of innovative systems that enable libraries to function as a network rather than as stand-alone institutions" (Palfrey, 2015). This suggests that libraries need to forge new

partnerships with public and private organizations in order to increase their social capital. The bigger their social network, the bigger the impact they can expect to make. If they can create large-scale collaborations with organizations that can contribute to upholding democracy and social responsibility, then this is going to change the way that libraries function in the future. If libraries can adapt to these new processes, it could make civic participation more meaningful and impactful

Pertinent literature relating to civic participation

In his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* Putnam delves into the major shift in civic engagement and explains how this change was a result of people's adjusted behaviors. His book explores the social and behavioral aspects of civic engagement which are important to understand in order to know how to engage with the public. He claims that Americans are no longer leveraging their social capital because they are not spending as much time with people. This is turn causes them to lose the personal connections with friends, family, and colleagues, which then has a negative impact on civic engagement. When we consider the current global pandemic and how it has hindered our ability to see our friends and family, we can see how this only aggravates the issue. Stay at home orders coupled with an increased use of online browsing and access to multiple social media platforms, only reinforces the point that Putnam makes about human interaction being limited. He argues that this lack of social capital hinders our ability to mold our views and allow political information to spread organically.

Kranich and Cohen both agree that it is the library's responsibility to cultivate an informed citizenry as libraries are known to be trusted institutions. Cohen believes that "public libraries should be primary instruments for civic education in the community" (Cohen, 2017).

She argues that they are the ideal organization to bring about change in the public's lack of civic knowledge and to create better citizens. However, Kranich argues that they also need to reimagine their methods to adapt to the current trends. It is essential for libraries to engross the public in an interactive way rather than simply providing access to information. Kranich, like Putnam, believes they should leverage their social capital by building strong collaborative partnerships to assist them in connecting with the public. This will bridge the divide by encouraging a healthy public discourse and filling the gaps of information and civic literacy.

Kranich also discusses the importance of creating an informed citizenry but argues that simply providing civic knowledge is not sufficient in that regard. In *Promoting Adult Learning through Civil Discourse in the Public Library*, she states that "strong democracy needs libraries to provide informal learning opportunities and spaces for citizens to engage" (Kranich, 2010). That is, they need to move beyond the basic level of civics, and she proposes that libraries provide spaces and learning opportunities for people "to engage directly in the decision and policy-making process" (Kranich, 2010). With a decline in civic engagement, libraries must begin considering how to inspire citizens to be more active. Libraries have a history of making this possible. The challenge is in competing with the social networks and online forums that currently fill the void with misinformation. Creating public forums for patrons to exchange opposing viewpoints, while fostering safe spaces, and providing opportunities to solve these issues together instead of behind a screen, is another feature that libraries can adapt. It is this type of civil discourse that is missing from today's politics. In *Reuniting the Divided States of America,* Kranich further argues the point that librarians should move beyond their traditional roles as gatekeepers of information and explains that it would be more beneficials if they transition to a pedagogical or instructional learning environment. Additionally, she recognizes

that librarians need to make progress in promoting civil discourse and transition from simply

providing knowledge (soft democracy) to community involvement (strong democracy). With a

solid history in supporting democratic practices, Kranich believes that libraries can leverage their

connections and make impactful collaborations to get people to reawaken from their civic

slumber and have civil discourses.

On the other hand, Lankes explains in the chapter titled *Threads* from his book, *The Atlas

of New Librarianship*, that a librarian's work "cannot be limited to a single institution" (Lankes,

2011). They need to be more straightforward in sharing their values when speaking to other

organizations and institutions. He further explains that librarians have an obligation to social

justice in which they need to reach out and find values that are important to the communities

they serve and begin to implement them. Moreover, Lankes acknowledges that "libraries are a

necessary component of democracy" (Lankes, 2011), but not the cornerstone of democracy. He

believes this assertion is often made primarily to receive more funding, as Cohen has clearly

stated when reflecting on the roles of libraries. She suggests that it is a bonus as "it provides a

rationale for increased funding" (Cohen, 2017). Lankes illustrates that libraries place an

emphasis on technologies that give voice to the people, such as social media and not on actual

action. Furthermore, he proposes that libraries reflect on the ways that they have promoted

democracy and improve those methods by walking the talk. "Unless we take the value of

learning seriously and back it up with real assessment and measurable impacts and outcomes,

these lines ring hollow and do not help us" (Lankes, 2011). Libraries must lead by example. It is

essential that libraries demonstrate that they deserve to be the cornerstone of democracy.

Weigand, like Lankes, argues in his book, *Part of Our Lives: A people's History of the

American Public Library*, that libraries may not in fact be essential to democracy. He alleges that

"efforts to measure the impact of public library service have largely depended on soft data"

(Weigand, 2015). He challenges the idea that there will be a more informed citizenry if there is

an increase in funding for libraries. He considers that "if Americans care to be better informed,

the 17,219 public library facilities available to them will provide this information for free"

(Weigand, 2015). Weigand questions that if the public is lacking in civic literacy, then perhaps

libraries are not as essential to democracy as they like to suggest. However, this argument only

reinforces the claims made by Kranich and Schull. That is, libraries have work to do. As

mentioned, they have the tools needed to address the growing concern of active civic

participation. They are trusted institutions, they have the access to information, and they have the

ability to increase their social capital and connect with other institutions to expand their scope.

When done correctly and creatively, libraries have the ability to reel in patrons and inspire them

to participate civically.

Schull proposes that libraries work from the inside out and be more strategic in their

pursuit of civic engagement. He suggests that we combine the various forms of civic practices

used today and create a foundation moving forward for developing new models in training staff.

This restructuring would occur within the LIS curriculum as well in order to fit this model.

Training for current staff on policy and advocacy would be included. This will create a type of

civic library, one which will be better equipped to arm its citizens with proper knowledge and

action. Incorporating civic knowledge and training for staff will require structural changes within

the institution, but they will essentially become more aligned with promoting democracy,

advocacy, and civic participation.

Positions, Viewpoints, and Assessments

It is clear that in our liberal democracy we have an abundance of information available at our fingertips. So much information is presented to us through a simple *Google* search that it has become increasingly difficult to navigate through all of the misinformation. We are now presented with the dilemma of information overload. "The problem is no longer a lack of information, but an absence of engagement" (Kranich, 2013). Libraries have done a great job at providing access to information and contributing to civic engagement through civic literacy. The foundation for civic engagement has been set, but it is time for libraries to divert their efforts toward civic participation as they also have a responsibility in creating an informed citizenry and living up to their position as the cornerstone of democracy. When successful in their pursuit, libraries strengthen democracy by cultivating civic participation.

While there are truths to all of the literature presented, as trusted institutions, libraries should use that trust to make a bigger impact in communities. They have enough leverage to ignite social movements. With a strong role as educators, librarians have the opportunity to expand their role in advocacy as well. Merging some of the core values of librarianship in promoting the value of democracy, could create a global campaign for an informed citizenry ready to take action whether at the ballot box or on the ballot as a candidate. An increased awareness of government functions is only one part of the equation. One must understand that knowing is not doing. For example, partaking in the act of voting impacts communities and will encourage voter participation, thereby creating an empowered community striving for real change.

Putnam's analysis for the decline in civic participation is true even today, 20 years since he wrote *Bowling Alone*. The global pandemic has forced millions of people to maintain a social distance and refrain from being out in large groups. Social media has consumed our smart

phones and tablets. These factors have exacerbated the decline in social interactions. It is true

that over 156 million people voted in the 2020 Presidential election (Montanaro, 2020), but this

does not disprove Putnam's assessment. The 2020 Presidential election is an anomaly that

resulted from the high levels of polarization incited by the current administration. Civic

disengagement still exists, as the number of voters only translates to about 66.5% of eligible

voters in the United States (Montanaro, 2020). What does this have to do with civic

participation? It has everything to do with civic participation as this is one of the reasons that it is

important for libraries to make the appropriate adjustments to their behaviors. It is imperative for

libraries to retrain staff, make updates to LIS curriculum, build social capital and increase

collaboration, and find creative ways to reach community members so they can participate more

civically. The United States has always been a trend setter and has led by example as a world

leader. If we can lead the world in this way with a citizenry that is more engaged and participates

civically, perhaps more countries will follow.

Conclusion

"Civic knowledge is a prerequisite for civic participation" (iCivics, 2020). Civic

knowledge cannot be discounted as it is a necessary foundation for civic participation. Librarians

are tasked with the job of making sure their communities are well informed and empowered to

take action with that knowledge in mind. For too long, they have been focusing on the

information aspect of civic engagement and have failed to increase their scope in actionable

terms. Kranich, Cohen, and Schull all agree to some extent that libraries need to reimagine the

way that they reach out to library patrons to create programming that is going to ignite a spark

for civic participation. This should not be difficult as libraries are accustomed to adapting to

change. A few ways that libraries can increase civic participation include expanding their social

capital, collaborating with other organizations, using creative approaches to reach out to patrons, and addressing institutional failings in terms of training staff and updating LIS curriculum. These actionable steps will help match the level of advocacy that libraries should implement to increase civic involvement. It is also important to consider Putnam's theory for declining civic participation. It helps to understand how libraries can connect with people to encourage them to take an interest. Weigand and Lankes argue that libraries are not the cornerstone to democracy. While this may be true to a certain extent, it is not too late for libraries to reflect upon this idea and use it to develop new methods and improve their roles as educators. Citizens will be inspired towards a path of civic participation if given the tools to do so. If Libraries can make the necessary changes to increase civic participation, there is no telling what that could mean for the world.

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